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ABSTRACT

A program in civic education is or should be at the heart of general education in community colleges. Citizenship education is congruent with the mission of the community college in that it is a practical enterprise leading to self-governance; it is integrative, using a variety of cognitive skills, attitudes and knowledge; it is community relevant; and it enhances career development. By adopting a conception of general education that inclines toward the notion of education for democratic participation, community colleges can contribute to the process of political socialization and better fulfill their obligation to the community which is their source of support. Advantages of civic education for community college students include the possibilities of reducing political power differentials; addressing social issues of importance to a "late bloomer" student population; and developing a sense of community among students. Objections to mandated programs in civic education focus on the curriculum constraints imposed on the community college. Issues of freedom versus constraint, individualism versus social obligation, and vocationalism versus liberal learning need to be resolved before such a prescriptive model of general education can be adopted. Civic education programs in community colleges contribute to the quality of community life and further the commitment to democratic values and practices which is the aim of the community college. (LAL)

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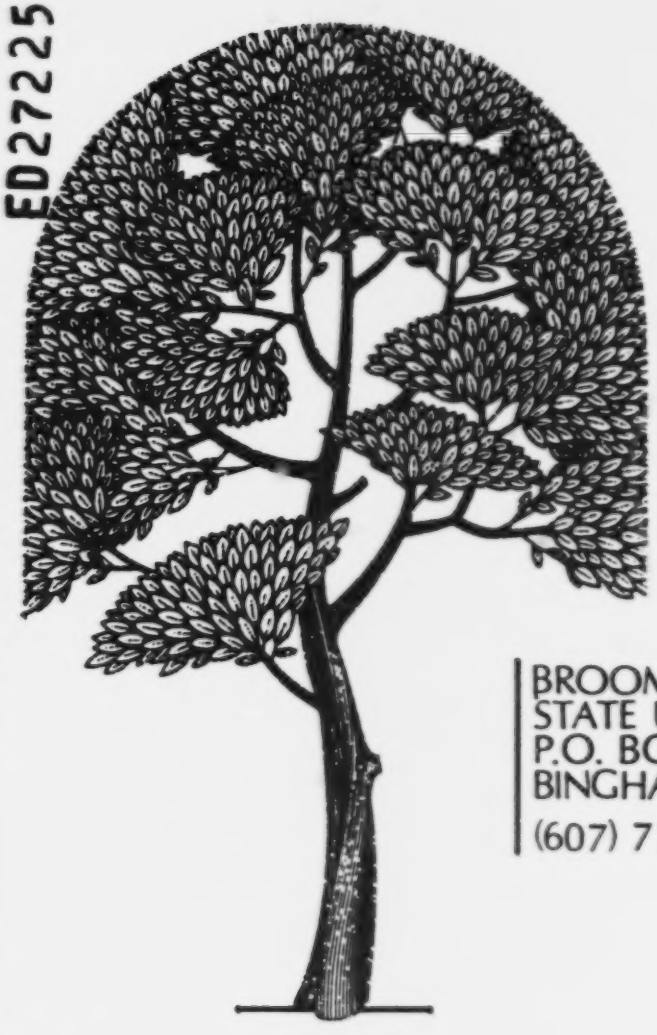

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2/26/86

In arguing for civic education as integral to appropriate conceptions of General Education in community colleges (perhaps in all of post-secondary education), I take it as given that General Education is important and necessary. But how important and necessary depends upon how General Education is conceived. My contention is that the principal significance of General Education at community colleges lies precisely in its identity with citizenship education; that is its central justification. What needs to be done, therefore, is the following: to provide a rationale for citizenship education as General Education; to support the claim that it is an essential community college undertaking; to justify a particular model of citizenship education as appropriate to the comprehensive community college; and to sort out arguments for and against requiring community college graduates to be civically literate.

It has been difficult in this century to frame compelling arguments for citizenship education in post-secondary institutions; community colleges are no different in that respect, although the sources of resistance to the notion are. On most college-university campuses the curriculum is so thoroughly dominated by academic disciplines that advocates of General Education have been forced to conceive it in terms of distribution requirements, i.e., as choices from among the academic discipline's introductory courses. However, that conservative model has given ground in recent years. Ironically it has been the discipline-wedded liberal arts colleges and universities which have responded earliest to the felt need for curricular coherence, while community colleges have lagged behind. Why that is so

is interesting, and it is suggestive of the way in which General Education needs to be conceived in comprehensive community colleges.

Since the majority of community college students are in vocational or professional-type programs, their principal interests are in acquiring employment skills. Career program faculty, similarly, place highest value upon the teaching of job-related knowledge. Consequently, the community college ambience is decidedly practical, and if not downright anti-intellectual, only grudgingly supportive of the aims of liberal learning, and openly critical of the space which it occupies in crowded technical curricula. All of this attention to marketable skills and aggressively practical concerns suggests that a program in General Education ought, if possible, to be, likewise, practical in conception. And that brings us round to citizenship education, a very practical enterprise for a people with aspirations to enlightened self-governance.

Besides being practical, citizenship education is integrative; it brings a great variety of cognitive skills, attitudes, and basic knowledge to bear on an enterprise in which all students of the college and all residents of the larger community share: the opportunities and obligations of participation. That, then, its integrative and local community-relevant character, is what would seem to recommend a conception of General Education for community college whose aim is to support democratic citizenship and whose essence is the concomitant values, knowledge, capacities, commitments, and practices.

The importance of community colleges to the development of workplace skills is well-known, but its potential role in the ongoing process of political socialization has received scant attention from scholars--this despite the fact that over 50% of all students entering postsecondary educational institutions start at community colleges. Of these, a mere 15% will complete baccalaureate degrees. For the overwhelming majority of community college students, the General Education program will be their last systematic exposure to liberal learning. Even if, as adults, they return to school periodically throughout their working lives, they will most likely take courses which enhance their career prospects. Thus it is important that the General Education program at the community college be a meaningful one: that rather than being merely instrumental--a set of service courses for career-oriented curricula--it stand by itself, as a coherent, well-integrated course of study with its own justification, wherein students engage in the context of public problems inquiry fundamental questions: of freedom, rights and obligations, of the nature of right and good, of justice, of the claims for and uses of knowledge, of cultural continuity and change, and of the features and legitimation claims of democratic government.

Community colleges are not just incidentally community-oriented; rather to be so is their obligation. The local community is, as well, the locus of most of their legal, moral, and fiscal support. This affin-

nity with the local community explains much about the community college's commitment to training the local workforce. It ought also to cause us to question why community colleges should neglect a civic responsibility at least as important as an economic one.

The roles of preparing community college students for local employment and upgrading the skills of the employed are very important ones, so much so that they tend to overwhelm objectives aimed more at human development and at stimulating intellectual, moral and aesthetic consciousness. But clearly, these are shortsighted aims, ones which shortchange both individuals and communities. Besides being well trained chemical technicians, competent nurses, efficient secretaries and data input clerks, people need to be intelligent and responsible citizens, both for the sake of their own autonomous growth and for the welfare of the community. We all have a very important stake in the quality of each other's civic education.

While on the one hand, different educational paths lead us to different jobs, salaries, working conditions and lifestyles, our common humanity, culture, and democratic commitments draw us together. That which each of us has in common--democratic citizenship--is a public office, replete with rights and privileges, but also mutual obligations. The sense of public obligation in our culture seems to be underdeveloped relative to our sense of private rights; educational institutions have a special role to play in cultivating especially the

moral sentiments and the sense of moral obligations to effective, participative citizenship. The selfish individualist turn of liberal democracy must be tempered by what Walter Lippmann termed a "public philosophy" if we are to survive the consequences of our single-minded pursuit of wealth, power, and advantage.

The characteristics of community colleges, as being of the community, essentially career-oriented, and practical in outlook would seem to accord well with a conception of General Education which inclines toward the notion of education for democratic participation. Characteristics of community college students seem also to support that contention. They, too, are mostly practical and of the community. But there are other compelling reasons why citizenship education ought to be a focal concern of community college educators.

One line of attack upon the community college finds in its low ratio of baccalaureate to terminal students evidence of an insidious practice of lowering the culturally inflated expectations of the academically less able. True or not (I would contend that the view is somewhat skewed and needlessly tendentious), the point would seem to be: do something important with community college curriculum and students if you would reduce social/intellectual class and political power differentials in the greater society. Here is a wonderful opportunity for "democracy's colleges" to strike a blow for democratic belief and practice through their commitments to civic education: in effect, to snatch social approbation from the jaws of inconsequentiality and cynicism. To do so would be to lower the probability which, in the absence of a strong General Education, one community

college research scholar argues, would inevitably increase "the gulf between social classes--with lower classes (being) given career education, and elites learning, as a consequence of General Education, to control their environments." "General Education," he concluded, "is for the creation of a free citizenry."[1]

Many community college students are so-called "late bloomers," a euphemistic term lumping together those who were late in catching on and those who simply lacked motivation to catch up. The point is that the slow and the lazy are suddenly adults before the law, living, usually working, in the community, and perhaps for the first time, making connections between learning and earning, between schooling and career opportunities, rights and duties, and the social, economic, moral and life-relevant consequences of political decisions. These late bloomers are encountering in a starker way than previously questions of fairness, just treatment, and the personal impact of social policies: from income taxes and sales taxes to social security; from the terms of alcohol consumption to abortion; from the rights and treatment of the disabled, ill and incompetent to the values and performance of the legal system. There exists, therefore, a splendid opportunity to infuse a program in political education with issues of great importance to this population at a time in their lives when they are "wired." That community college students are not uniformly adolescent, that a typical class includes a broad range of ages and experience, merely enriches the learning environment as we well know.

Recently, an increasingly respectable literature addressing the communitarian aspects of democratic citizenship has appeared. Having certain

origins in classical Greek conceptions of community, civic obligation and especially, participation, it draws also upon modern European social and intellectual criticism. In one substantial aspect, this critical tradition is deeply committed to the creative, self-enlightening political practices of dialogue, engagement, and action, to political participation within local communities. It is an agenda aimed at reversing the political disengagement which both social and geographical scale, political representation, and bureaucratic inertia seem to engender.

I take this line of intellectual and political thinking to be in spirit profoundly supportive of a community college civic education program whose aim is to acquaint students with the problematic nature of social reality, knowledge, and especially, governance; with the importance of taking personal responsibility for one's political education; with the sense of mutual obligation to political discourse and participation; and with the need to participate in issues which affect the local community. The characteristics of community college students, the institution's place in the community, and what I regard as very weighty intellectual and moral arguments on behalf of a participative and political form of General Education, establish the importance not only of citizenship education, but also of its essential inclusion in the curriculum.

What remains is to consider the various objections both to a mandated program in civic education and to the curricular constraints which, consequently, it would impose upon the community college. Previously I argued against General Education conceived as a bunch of "service" courses in support of career program aims and in favor of a coherent, intrinsically

justifiable model; here I want also to maintain a view of its prescriptive nature. This is the positive side of the previous argument framed in terms of freedom versus constraint, individualism versus social obligation, and vocationalism versus liberal learning--each contextualized by curricular considerations.

First is freedom versus constraint. Its extreme form is in the notion of "free election," a higher education curricular pattern originating in the middle of the 19th century, modified as "distribution requirements" through the 1950's, but in vogue once again during the turbulent 60's and 70's. Free election is still supported at some distinguished colleges and universities. A rather incisive rejection of free election/free choice in higher education is voiced by Cohen:

> Free election--any student, any course--is an admission that the college no longer has the moral authority to insist on any combination of courses, that it no longer recognizes the validity of sequence or organizing principles of curriculum integration.[2]

The assumptions implicit in Cohen's view include the notion of knowledge as cumulative and integrative; of personal importance in making intelligible sense of a world of enormous complexity; and of use in guiding thought and reflection leading to action. There is, on his account, an obligation in higher education to package knowledge and devise learning so as to be both personally edifying and socially useful: in short, it is aimed at improving the quality of both private and public life.

Through previous discussion of citizenship education I have suggested that individuality must be tempered by a sense of social responsibility. The intuitive view is that our culture and its schools are too much given

to expressions of individuality, almost pathologically occupied with "freedom from" societal impositions. A healthy independence is, of course, necessary to maintain democratic institutions against the traditional attempts at economic and political aggrandizement by people in power, and at the behest of group advocates of particular, sectarian causes. This is one of the curious paradoxes of democratic government: one must keep its institutions and practices at arms length and to regard established norms critically in order to sustain the right to structure both.

The problem lies, I think, in having no evident, nor socially accepted, adjudicative principles to help us to balance impulses toward individuality on the one hand, or social responsibility on the other. One such attempt, the most intellectually satisfying to date is that of John Rawls.[3] On his account a theory of "justice as fairness" performs a vital social role in a liberal democratic polity by adjudicating between principles of liberty and equality in a society viewed as a collectivity of free and equal persons. Properly understood justice as fairness provides a context for reflection upon the rights and duties of democratic citizenship. Thus an important justification for turning General Education in community colleges toward questions of democratic rights and obligations follows from the Rawlsian view.

Finally, the tension between liberal learning and vocationalism needs to be elucidated. Much rhetoric has appeared recently purporting to salvage liberal learning once and for all by showing it to be useful to the workplace. The best of the literature allows the importance, not only of cognitive skills presumed to arise from liberal arts and sciences courses

and concentrations--communication skills, calculating skills, critical thinking skills, etc.--but also of the content of the humanities. Thus art, music, and philosophy are thought to be redeemed through the preferences of business executives for cultured associates: peers who can appreciate good art and music as well as the subtleties of wit and intellect. These "goods" may, in fact, devolve from liberal learning, but such reasons are obviously inadequate justification for General Education.

Consider, for instance, what employers, as against managers, want in ordinary workers--clerks, technicians, health care workers. Quite a different valuational attitude is suggested: communication skills become the capability of writing technical reports by formula and to speak audibly and intelligibly to customers and clients; it is distinctly not an endorsement of oral and written expression as personally liberating and as an invitation to discourse. Math skills are for the preparation of bills and balance sheets, not as illustrative of forms of reasoning; social or behavioral sciences are for acquiring practical knowledge of the economics of the business firm, or the exploitable psychological motivation of customers. This is liberal learning as instrumental--in the service of narrowly conceived ends. It has little to do with more respectable (and ancient) conceptions of liberal learning as liberating, as being about the enduring questions of life and living, and about the rights, duties, and purposes of civic association. It is this latter tradition of liberal learning which must be defended in postsecondary

education, in the community college, in the context, I submit, of General Education.

It is my contention that a coherent program in civic education in the community college ought to aim at fulfilling the most serious commitments to democratic values and practices, thereby fulfilling the obligations of community colleges to contribute significantly to the quality of community life, and further, that it take special advantage of the intellectural and situational characteristics of community college students. Properly conceived, a program in civic education is and ought to be at the heart of General Education in the nation's community colleges.

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[1]Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer, The American Community College. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982, p. 327.

[2]Cohen and Brawer, Ibid., p. 328.

[3]John Rawls, A Theory of Justice. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1971. The counter argument, taken from a libertarian position is most skillfully put by Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State and Utopia. New York: Basic Books, 1974.

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